Improving employer responsiveness

Policy, consultation and research: the key messages

LEARNING AND SKILLS IMPROVEMENT SERVICE

Research

Flexible and relevant delivery for employer-facing provision

2 Publisher

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Flexible and relevant delivery for employer-facing provision

Introduction

This pamphlet extracts the key messages for improving employer responsiveness emerging from a review of policy and QIA/LSIS* research, development and consultation activities relating to the development of flexible and relevant delivery for employer-facing provision. It is one of a series of six pamphlets that consider how the FE sector can develop employer-responsive provision. The others are as follows.

- 1 Developing an employer-focused mission and strategy
- 2 Marketing and infrastructure to support employer engagement
- 4 Quality improvement for employer responsiveness
- 5 Networks and partnerships for employer responsiveness
- **6** FE support for business development

The QIA/LSIS review looked at 30 reports, considering the implications for quality improvement emerging from research and development activities commissioned by QIA on FE providers' responsiveness to employers' needs since the establishment of QIA in April 2006.

It also considered the related policy context on employer engagement.
The full review is available from www.excellencegateway.org.uk/research

Each pamphlet considers issues emerging from a range of material relating to employer responsiveness.

Policy development

Government White Papers and independent reviews that have contributed to policy development in relation to employer responsiveness.

Consultation and feedback

Outcomes of consultation studies and events that provide insights into issues and concerns relating to the employer responsiveness of providers and other stakeholders.*

Research and development

Outcomes from QIA/LSIS studies on employer responsiveness.

The pamphlets also provide short case studies and advice on what providers should do to improve their employer responsiveness.

Key features of employer-responsive provision

The former QIA (now LSIS) identified the key features of responsive provision in *Supporting good practice in employer responsiveness:* a guide to quality improvement (April 2008). See pages 18 and 19 for a mapping of the review items to these key features.*

Features of flexible and relevant delivery for employer-facing provision

Flexible and relevant delivery is a vital component of employer-facing provision. Key features relating to this aspect of the service include:

- providing training promptly in response to identified needs;
- flexible delivery of training in a way that minimises disturbance to the employer's business;
- providing initial assessment and guidance for all learners to ensure they and their employers get maximum benefits from their training and are supported to progress further;
- trainers and assessors who are experts in their field and interact effectively with employers and their workforce;
- using high-quality, appropriate training resources.

Issues emerging from the review relating to flexible and relevant delivery are considered in the sections that follow.

*

The numbers in orange boxes on pages 18 and 19 refer to items included in the review. They are consistent with the numbers in orange boxes elsewhere in this pamphlet.

Policy development

Flexible approaches to learning and accreditation

By its nature, employer-responsive provision requires a flexible approach to programme design and delivery. The introduction of the Train to Gain programme, building on the National Employer Training Pilots, was announced in the 2005 White Paper Skills: getting on in business, getting on at work, 2 which focused providers' attention on the need to deliver learning relevant to the needs of employers and employees. Delivery at or near the workplace is a central component of this work. The same White Paper 2 also confirmed the development of a qualifications framework that would provide accreditation for units of learning.

The following year another White Paper Further education: raising skills, improving life chances 4 announced the expansion and broadening of Train to Gain and reiterated the importance of a qualification system to better serve learners and employers, including a new Apprenticeship qualification, the Foundation Learning Tier for qualifications below Level 2 and simplified qualifications for adults.

These two White Papers confirmed the commitment to flexible accreditation for responsive provision.

Information, advice and guidance

The provision of information, advice and guidance (IAG) for adult learners has long been a neglected area. The Train to Gain programme encouraged the take-up of IAG and provided resources to fund it. The Leitch Review of Skills 5 proposed that a new adult careers service should be introduced.

The need for a more coherent service to assist people moving from worklessness into sustainable jobs was considered in a joint White Paper from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) Opportunity, employment and progression: making skills work. 6 This set out what a modern, responsive and personalised service should include to encourage job entry and career development. It also announced the introduction of a new adult advancement and careers service.*

2 Skills: getting on in business, getting on at work

4

Further education: raising skills, improving life chances

5

Prosperity for all in the global economy: world-class skills

6

Opportunity. employment and progression: making skills work



A new agency is being designed by LSC – the adult advancement and careers service to provide adults with information, advice and guidance.

The FE sector, jobcentres and new careers service should work together to:

- ensure easy access to information and advice;
- engage the lowest skilled in improving their skills;
- provide screening and diagnostic assessment for those without qualifications;
- provide post-employment skills training linked to pre-employment help – Train to Gain linked with Jobcentre Plus to provide funding for skills development;
- provide a flexible and responsive delivery system.

The White Paper also introduced a legal right to basic and intermediate skills and qualifications for adults, and Skills Accounts for individuals, which provide a virtual voucher of state funding to purchase relevant learning.

Moving Apprenticeships into the mainstream

Policy developments in Apprenticeships echo the need for flexibility, relevance and guidance. The joint DIUS and Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) report World-class Apprenticeships: unlocking talent, building skills for all set out the government's vision for Apprenticeships to become a mainstream option for 16–18 year olds and for significant growth for Apprenticeships for over-25 year olds. Increased employer and learner demand would be achieved in part by a more flexible and relevant approach; for example:

- the inclusion of employability skills, mentoring, progression routes, entry requirements and time off to train within the Apprenticeship blueprint;
- including component qualifications of Apprenticeships in the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) for easier movement between 14–19 Diplomas and Apprenticeships;
- establishing a National Apprenticeship Service to provide support from initial expressions of interest to completion and progression;
- increasing the range and flexibility of Apprenticeships and enabling employers to design their own frameworks, drawing on the Sector Skills Councils' banks of qualifications;
- more 'taster' work experience places for key stage 4 pupils;
- building higher education (HE) progression routes by mapping frameworks to the UCAS tariff:*
- appointment of 'super-mentors' to support people from under-represented groups.

World-class
Apprenticeships:
unlocking talent,
building skills for all

*

UCAS provides a central admissions service to HE in the UK's universities and colleges. The UCAS tariff is a points system used to report achievement for entry to HE in a numerical format. It establishes agreed comparability between different types of qualifications and provides comparisons between applicants with different types and volumes of achievement.

Consultation and feedback

Supporting more responsive provision

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service is the new sector-owned body, formed in October 2008 from CEL and QIA.

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The Leitch Review of Skills – seizing the agenda: a report of the CEL policy seminar series held April–July 2007

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The government and LSC have recently announced more flexibilities within Train to Gain. For more information see the LSC website.

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Consultation on a programme to meet the challenges of 'World Class Skills – implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England'

16

Making a success of working with employers: dissemination conference journal The CEL* policy seminars considering the Leitch Review of Skills raised issues about the extent to which a responsive and flexible approach could be provided when full qualifications are the measure of provider success and as a result public subsidy, funding outcomes and quality measures are orientated towards full qualifications.* The report also said that if providers wanted to increase customer satisfaction and gain competitive advantage they should develop their capacity to design curricula and qualifications that meet employers' needs.

A QIA consultation on the development needs emerging from Leitch World Class Skills – implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England 15 identified several actions supporting more responsive provision, including:

- developing staff in new or changing roles ie work-based assessors/trainers, subject specialists within business development teams;
- working with employed adult learners in the workplace;
- increasing delivery staff awareness of business environments;
- maintaining staff occupational knowledge and skills.

Flexibility and relevance were themes running through the QIA's Development Programme for Train to Gain. Messages from the programme were disseminated at three national conferences in July 2008 and recorded in *Making a success of working with employers: dissemination conference journal.* 16 'Flexible and responsive delivery to meet employers' needs' was a workshop theme and principles of effective practice relating to this topic were identified in these workshops and throughout the conferences as:

- continuous updating of teaching staff skills and knowledge;
- design for learners as well as employers;
- effective use of initial assessment;
- minimum disruption to work patterns;
- exploitation of technology for quicker, more cost-effective processes;
- flexible employment arrangements to ensure providers can deliver flexibly;
- expert communication from trainers and assessors.

Research and development activity

There is a high level of consistency in the messages emerging from policy development across government that emphasise the need for:

- relevance in the learning and development on offer identified though analysis of employers' and individuals' needs and aspirations;
- flexibility in the response to identified needs.

Relevance in learning and development on offer

As has already been noted, the Train to Gain Development Programme considered flexible and relevant provision in some detail. The Employer Responsiveness Resource Pack 18 provides a substantial amount of support materials within the module, 'Developing flexible delivery and moving from provider-focused to employer-focused delivery' including the following sections:

"What is flexible delivery?';

- 'Flexible delivery of learning' (considers what should be taken into account when planning flexible delivery);
- "Meeting the needs of individual learners";
- "'Embedding literacy, language and numeracy';
- "'Assess-Train-Assess'.

Development Programme for Train to Gain: Year 1 Improvement Projects 20 considered the following topics relating to flexible and responsive provision. 18

The Development Programme for Train to Gain Employer Responsiveness Resource Pack

20

Development Programme for Train to Gain: Year 1 Improvement Projects

Using the workplace as a basis for learning

Projects developed a range of ways of encouraging an emphasis on the workplace as a basis for learning including working groups, checklists and protocols for employer engagement. In some cases, the activities successfully acted as a catalyst for changing the way the workplace is viewed within the context of learning. 20

20

Development Programme for Train to Gain: Year 1 Improvement Projects

Assessing vocational and Skills for Life needs and using outcomes in individual learning plans

Generally more communication across departments is needed in carrying out initial assessments of vocational and Skills for Life needs to secure consistency of approach and improve quality. There is also a need for greater employer engagement in initial assessments and in the development of individual learning plans (ILPs). Actions taken by the projects included establishing working groups, running continuing professional development (CPD) sessions, revisions of systems and procedures, and the development of materials and tools.

Implementing Assess–Train–Assess

The Assess–Train–Assess approach can be implemented in different ways but training must always be a central component. Colleges in particular have inherent difficulties in securing a flexible approach to work-based assessment and training. Staff contracts and conditions of service limit flexible working but bolt-on models such as business development units (BDUs), which employ staff on more flexible conditions, fall down when the scope and volume of workforce development increase beyond the capacity of these staff to deliver. Processes for initial assessment should recognise the requirements of the Assess–Train–Assess approach. The training role of assessors needs to be clarified and support provided for those taking on this role. 20

Activities undertaken in relation to this theme included:

- a detailed staff audit of current skills and experience;
- development and delivery of tailored CPD relating to interpreting and implementing the Assess–Train–Assess model;
- reviewing staff contracts and job roles and expanding capacity.

Embedding Skills for Life in vocational learning

Skills for Life needs to be embedded in responsive provision and skills brokers and business managers need to share knowledge or contacts effectively with Skills for Life teachers. Improvement Project activity included developing models and resources to embed Skills for Life within a particular NVQ. 20

Meeting the needs of small and medium enterprises

Tailored provision and communication are especially relevant to dealing with small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Personalising content is much more effective than a 'one size fits all' approach. Developing good customer relations and networks are crucially important. Some projects developed bespoke marketing approaches for specific sectors and sought better feedback from SMEs to improve the service they were offering them. 20

Improving success rates in Apprenticeships

There has been a great deal of research into how to improve success rates in Apprenticeship programmes. The ORC International report for QIA Assessing the reasons for improvements in Apprenticeships completion 19 looked at what features of provider practice improved success rates with case study examples. The study concluded that there was no single reason for improvement in completion rates but that changes probably contributing to improved success included the following.

- Provision of consistent information throughout recruitment:
- information communicated to learners prior to enrolment and during induction helped to set realistic expectations.
- Restructuring programmes, re-ordering and integrating elements of Apprenticeship Frameworks:
- providers changed the way the programme was delivered to suit the needs of the learners and employers: one provider changed from day release to block release following feedback from an employer;
- key skills were integrated to ensure they had relevance to the occupational sector and moved to the beginning of programmes to develop the skills Apprentices needed to do their jobs.

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Development
Programme for
Train to Gain: Year 1
Improvement Projects

19

Assessing the reasons for improvements in Apprenticeships completion

Supporting progression routes within Train to Gain

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Supporting progression

Progression is extremely important in the development of a skilled and qualified workforce but often difficult to achieve in employer-responsive provision and work-based learning. A study conducted by IFF Research for QIA Supporting progression routes within Train to Gain 22 concluded that:

- providers think there is demand for progression within Train to Gain, especially in the Health and Social Care and Childcare sectors:
- progression pathways are routinely discussed with employers and learners at the beginning of a course to help employers plan for the future, but less frequently at the end of a course;
- securing progression for Train to Gain learners places extra demands on providers;
- providers that are not offering progression routes are under-estimating the demand for follow-up training;
- work is needed to secure transferability and compatibility between learning programmes;
- providers' staff need training on giving advice to employers.

The National Employer Service

The perspectives of employers delivering training through the National Employer Service (NES) were explored in a York Consulting study for QIA. The 2008 report National Employer Service – effective practice research 26 notes that many employers embedded a culture of training throughout the organisation, supporting careers with training and personal development. Setting out the benefits of training and possibilities for promotion encourages employee participation and completion.

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National Employer Service - effective practice research

The study also identified the following.

- Strong relationships with local training providers and NES are important to secure effective and tailored provision.
- Employers found in-house delivery effective because:
- programmes can be tailored to meet specific business needs either totally bespoke programmes or adding small elements;
- learners can apply training directly to the particular employment environment, aligning on- and off-the-job learning;
- the company culture can be promoted through training;
- resources and content can be standardised and controlled centrally for consistent delivery across multiple sites.
- 12 Employers that preferred in-house assessment listed the following benefits:
 - quality control of assessment process to ensure it meets their company's needs;
 - appointing internal assessors they are confident know the requirements of the job;
 - flexibility to carry out assessments at a time and location to fit the company's needs.
 - Online learning is primarily used to support face-to-face learning but online recruitment systems and learning resources encourage flexible learning outside allocated learning hours. Online portfolio systems allow mobile, non office-based staff remote access to vocational qualification assessment evidence.
 - Effective recruitment processes can help increase staff retention and completion of training.
 - Continuous assessment and two-way feedback keep learners motivated and identify how training could be improved.
 - Some employers provide formal and informal support for learners, such as:
 - supportive line managers;
 - allocating a 'buddy' or mentor, who is typically in a similar role to the learner rather than in a management position;
 - mentoring the new trainee in their workplace for a set period following completion of their training;
 - team-building weeks to develop morale.

Meeting the challenges of flexibility

Many studies explored ways of enabling providers to meet the challenge presented by the need to operate flexibly, often with individuals or small groups in the workplace. One of the key difficulties is reconciling the needs of employers – which may be for irregular, customised provision for low numbers of learners at a time and place of their choosing – with regular, mainstream provision for full-time learners. The RCU conducted research for OIA. Research into the FE system's development needs to meet the challenge of the implementation of World Class Skills, 27 which concluded that managing staff workloads to provide flexibility of response was a strategic and long-term need for the sector. The need for models of effective employer engagement in hard-to-reach markets (SMEs, rural areas, casualised workforce, etc) was identified as an operational and immediate requirement.*

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Research into the FE system's development needs to meet the challenge of the implementation of World Class Skills

The World Class Skills developing responsive provision programme can support providers on this and other aspects of employer responsive delivery. For further information see http://wcs.excellence. qia.org.uk

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Whole Organisation Consultancy: an analysis of completed frameworks to measure and improve employer responsiveness

Meeting the challenges of employer responsiveness

A programme of Whole Organisation Consultancy to enable the FE sector to meet the challenges of employer responsiveness is being provided. Initially part of the QIA Development Programme for Train to Gain and now being rolled out by the World Class Skills programme, the first set of completed reviews, Whole Organisation Consultancy: an analysis of completed frameworks to measure and improve employer responsiveness 28 reveals the likely current state of play in flexible and responsive provision, as follows.

IAG

Although much activity is said to be taking place, IAG needs substantial development and few providers see it as a major priority. IAG is critically concerned with the employee as learner, which may bring up potential conflicts between the aspirations of employees and their employers. Providers will need to be well versed in resolving these issues and may need further support and good practice examples.

Diagnostic assessment of employees

This does not appear to be well developed and has low priority. Providers need support to see it as a vital component of work-based learning and to develop and use diagnostic tools to accelerate learning.

Developing provision to meet needs

Providers report they are developing this area but tend not to rank its improvement highly. Their preoccupation with full qualifications – which provide little scope for customising – may account for this. In the longer term, they will need to develop their capacity to design bespoke provision reflecting business demands and using full potential for learning at work.

Delivery of learning

Providers still find it difficult to routinely develop and deliver products and services to meet business needs. While some progress has been made, difficulties remain in securing the required number of staff with the appropriate skills to provide flexible training and assessment at the workplace and use work-related opportunities for learning. Work to develop capacity is being undertaken but needs to be seen as a higher priority.

Assessment and certification of learning

Most providers are aware of the need to develop feedback loops to employers and employees but very few claimed their provision was well developed in relation to assessment and certification of learning. This may imply that they are unable to routinely provide the basic requirements of on-the-job assessment, which is a crucial component of workforce development.

Speedy analysis of needs

Education + Training Skills (ETS) (available from www.excellencegateway. org.uk/wcs/webfm send/183) offers training solutions for employers across a range of work-based learning skills, through Apprenticeships, Train to Gain and full-cost recovery work. It has developed tools and frameworks to support fast-paced, innovative thinking around the needs of the business and continuous reviews of the impact of their training on its clients. ETS developed their team's capacity to analyse their markets and enhanced their strategic thinking and decision-making and this is now evident throughout the organisation's delivery mechanisms and resources.

Questions to address

▶ Is the development of training solutions in your organisation informed both by an analysis of the market more generally and the specific needs of the client? Does it take account of both employer and employees' needs so that the content and pace of learning match their ambitions?

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Implications for practice – what should providers do?

Learners' needs and aspirations

Middlesbrough College (available from www.excellencegateway.org.uk/wcs/webfm_send/185) used its newly developed training needs analysis (TNA) system to gain an insight not only into the training needs of each of the employees, but more generally into their aspirations and previous experience. They asked about hobbies, outside interests, past work experience and responsibilities – this gave them the opportunity to start building relationships.

The 30-minute interviews revealed much more information than originally envisaged and learners were happy to share the information with their employers too. The team also got information on eligibility, which helped to shape their training proposal, identifying both cost-savings for the employer and time-savings for the college team.

Questions to address

► To what extent can your organisation provide a prompt and relevant service to employers, which is delivered at or near the workplace to minimise disruption to the business?

Employers' percptions of 'flexibility'

Tameside College (available from www.excellencegateway.org.uk/wcs/webfm_send/189) consulted the training manager of a leading food manufacturing company to identify what 'flexible' meant for their company. The answer was that the college should, 'work the same way we do, 24/7 in line with our three shifts'. They also investigated how they could achieve a smooth flow of information between the company and the college assessor.

The college had recently developed an Assess-Train-Assess approach to NVQ training which meant that most of the training for the company could be delivered on the shop floor at each employee's workstation. Training and assessment identified in the individual learning plan were covered during working time whenever an opportunity arose, with help from supervisors. Underpinning knowledge was delivered on the shop floor and in the product meeting room. Assessment and training were delivered on a one-to-one basis, with the assessor being case-loaded and free to manage their own time to optimise learning and assessment opportunities.

Part-way through the programme, the two original coordinating personnel left the company and Tameside discovered that their colleagues were not aware of the programme. The college had to re-brief and re-research needs. 'We hadn't considered that things would change, that you can't just set it up and walk away, you have to keep in contact.' Meanwhile the assessor carried out a mock shop-floor assessment on the new manager, who was delighted with the process and the obvious benefits to the organisation.

During the pilot project, employees constantly asked if they could start the next programme and spoke highly of the assessor, demonstrating the good learner—assessor relationship that had been created. Twelve learners successfully achieved the full Level 2 NVQ, and the employer was so delighted that they have since commissioned further cohorts of learners and training in other NVQ areas. Two years on, the college is still working regularly with the company and has been able to expand into delivering Skills for Life and engineering programmes.

Questions to address

- ► Does the information gathering on employers' needs specifically ask 'what does flexible mean for you'?
- ▶ Do you keep employer managers in the loop without bombarding them with irrelevant detail?
- ▶ Do you provide a single point of contact and a consistent presence at times that fit in with the client's work?
- ► Do you give a choice of delivery model that takes into account the requirements of the qualification, the employer, the employee and the experience of the delivery staff?

Key features of employer-responsive provision	Included in review items		
	Policy development	Consultation and feedback	Research and development
Employer-focused mission and strategy			
We explicitly recognise the importance of employer responsiveness throughout our organisation	1 2 3 4 5 9 10	14 15 16 17	18 23 24 27 30
Our training portfolio is driven by employer and labour market needs	1 2 3 4 5 6 10	16	18 23 24 28 29 30
We have detailed knowledge of national, regional and local skills needs and likely business developments	1 2 3 4 5 6 9 10	14 15 16	18 23 24 27 28 30
Marketing and infrastructure to support employe	r engagement		
We are aware of the business needs of employers and are committed to fulfilling them	1 2 3 4 5 7	14 15 16 17	18 20 23 24 28 30
We provide employers with consistent, named contacts who understand their business		17	18 20 23 27 30
We have appropriate and dependable administrative systems for employer-facing work		14 15 16 17	18 20 23 28 30
We record all interactions with employers and use this information for planning and marketing		16 17	18 20 23 28 30
We provide high-quality organisational and training needs analysis services		16	18 20 22 23 28 30
We enable employers to secure appropriate training	4 5	15 16	18 20 23

24 25 27

Here the items from the review catalogue are mapped to the key features of responsive provision identified in QIA's Supporting good practice in employer responsiveness: a guide to quality improvement (2008).

at a reasonable cost

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Mapping key features to the review

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Key features of employer-responsive provision	Policy development	Consultation and feedback	Research and development	
Flexible and relevant delivery				
We are able to provide training promptly in response to identified needs	2 6	14 15 16 17	18 20 23 27 28 30	
We provide training in a way that minimises disturbance to the employer's business and is delivered flexibly	4 5 6	17 18	18 20 23 26 28 30	
We ensure that all trainees get initial assessment and guidance to ensure they and their employers get maximum benefits from their training and are supported to progress further	5 6 8	16	18 19 20 22 23 25 30	
Our trainers and assessors are experts and interact effectively with employers and their workforce	1 2 4 9 10	14 15 16 17	18 20 22 24 28 30	
We ensure that we use high-quality, appropriate training resources	3		18 23 24 26 30	
Quality improvement				
We help employers to identify the likely impact of training and development on their business and to measure the impact in the short and long term	1 2 3 4 5 7 9 10	15	18 20 27 28 30	
We evaluate all our training and have rigorous quality assurance arrangements to continually improve the service	8	14 16 17	18 19 21 27 28 30	
We share information and good practice with our colleagues to enable everyone to improve	9 10	15 17	19 20 21 24 25 27	
Networks and partnerships				
We are part of local training networks and partnerships aiming to improve the service to employers	1 3 4 5 9 11	12 13 14 15 17	18 19 22 25 26 27	
We support networks of local employers to improve their access to training	3 6		20 24 27	
Support for business development				
We support employers' wider activities, such as using expertise or facilities for product development, or encourage them to use similar support from other sources	9 10 11	12 13	23	

Included in review items

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